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"AT THE DEAD CENTER OF THINGS" IN DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*: MIMESIS, VIOLENCE, AND RELIGIOUS AWE

Matthew J. Packer

Has Don DeLillo's supermarket satire, *White Noise*, passed its own use-by date? Critic Dana Phillips suggests that the work's contribution to our understanding of postmodernism has been thoroughly examined (235).[1] His claim that critics have mined the novel of its slogans and readings confirms a widespread impression the novel is a resource all but depleted. A feeling of belatedness marks the commentary, as though *White Noise* now has become like its own "most photographed barn in America" (12). Arguments about this and the novel's other scenes of simulacra[2] have made this passage the "most discussed passage in DeLillo"—and suggested both it and the novel can no longer be experienced directly (Cowart 87). Much of the commentary resembles the news in the novel where "no one thing is either more or less plausible than any other" (129); one observer's recommendation that we suspend criticism in "a state of permanent flotation" tells of the exhaustion.[3]

Since the novel's publication, though, DeLillo has increasingly revealed, in his other works, interviews, and essays, questions largely of anthropology—not only has *White Noise* not expired, a fundamental element in the author's art has remained unexamined. Where the novelist's early work announced especially American topics, the later

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novels like *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991), and *Underworld* (1997), along with greater public commentary, have emphasized an ongoing concern about mimesis, violence, and the sacred: an apprehension of culture like that found in the work of René Girard. The contemporary writer, notes DeLillo, "has lost a great deal of influence," but the margins of the culture are still "a perfect place to observe what's happening at the dead center of things" ("American Strangeness" 16)—DeLillo's reflections upon many ground zeroes and his question about why "we depend on disaster to consolidate our vision" ("Power of History" 63) resemble those illustrations by Girard and Eric Gans that show how the sacred and the significant in our culture stem from the misunderstood human tendency toward imitation and violence. In *Libra*'s "seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" (181), in *Mao II*'s "raids on human consciousness" once made by novelists but now terrorists (42), in *Underworld*'s "awe of central events" (826), and also in response to September 11, the author has explored how imitation and mimetic violence in particular generate crises that become, problematically, sacred in their power.

In *White Noise,* though, the sacred and the other anthropological elements have scarcely been considered—despite the religious awe looming in the airborne toxic event and the narrator's invitation to consider "the scientific study of the cultural behavior and development of man" (320).[4] Hidden among the novel's characters—hidden *by* them—is an imitative tendency that first shapes not representational behavior but desire itself. The same desire DeLillo identifies first in *Americana*, which "moves from first person consciousness to third person . . . a universal third person . . . we all want to be" (270); the same triangular desire Girard documents in the French novel[5] structures much of *White Noise*. Commentators have alluded to its symptoms of imitative desire, but without following the paths from the mimesis to the crises.[6]

Missing in the conversation about *White Noise,* in other words, is the possibility that mimesis in fact *precedes* language. The critical problem for the species, it appears, stems not from the "precession of simulacra" as Baudrillard argues (2), but the fact that humans, individually and historically, imitate *not* the world around them first, but each other. The crucial problem for the species, Girard and Gans argue,[7] is the escalation of imitative rivalry: in protohuman history, the institutions of language and the sacred appear during crises when animal hierarchies can no longer contain the violence arising from rivalries that are increasingly mimetic and more destructive; language (originally sacred) marks the *emergency* of escalating conflict, and in religious, originary scenes brings dispensation with the design at least of containing further violence. DeLillo's architectures

of culture and violence reveal a similar understanding: the author has, as Cornel Bonca notes, "focused increasingly on language not as a system of signifiers and signifieds," but as "a massive strategy to cope with mortality" (27). And in *White Noise,* more than in his other novels, DeLillo does explore how the fear of death in particular, as well as being private, is a product both of anxiety about mimetic conflict and of awe at "man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood" (22)—however complicated by technology. In returning us to the novel's mimesis and then to its violence, mimetic theory brings much to that surface of the novel which otherwise remains awash in "deeper seas of inattention" (*White Noise* 39).

Mimesis

Among the novel's most poignant media moments are not the random semiotic fragments, the "white noise," but the occasions when characters imitate, consciously or instinctively, models and performances simply furnished by the media. DeLillo focuses less on any sound bite than on adoptive behaviors so common, so simple, they normally go unobserved—unless Jack Gladney is around. When Jack notices Steffie watching TV alone, for example, he silently comments, "she moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken" (84). Similarly, as Babette feeds Wilder, she "spoons soup into his mouth, creating facial expressions for him to mimic and saying, 'yes yes yes'"(209); when the family sees Babette on television, Jack notes Wilder's attempts close in front of the screen to meet his mother's image and words in "sensible-sounding fragments" (105). Where deliberate, as conscious desire, imitative behavior is comically recognizable. Jack's colleague, Nicholas Grappa, admits the greatest influence of his life is *Kiss of Death*: "When Richard Widmark pushed that old lady in the wheelchair down that flight of stairs, it was like a personal breakthrough for me. It resolved a number of conflicts. I copied Richard Widmark's sadistic laugh and used it for ten years. It got me through some tough emotional periods. . . . It clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person" (214–15). To distinguish between real and merely imitated action in a character like Grappa, as Arno Heller has done (42), misrepresents the broader condition underpinning lives that poststructuralists suspect are "scripted": Since the propagation of culture—whether conscious or instinctive, technological or social—depends on the mimetic tendency in the first place, questions about authenticity only obscure the dynamics and very structure of desire.

The novel's great spectacle of imitative ambition, Jack's adoption of Adolf Hitler as role model, shows why the mimesis in desire

seldom attracts notice: the comical and historical distance between Jack and Hitler is vast, so any question of Jack's authenticity is absurd—his imitative attitude is obvious. That Jack has "latched onto something big" (188) and that Hitler is "fine, solid, dependable" (89) reflect Hitler's role as what Girard terms an "*external* mediator" (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* 9), an admissible model from outside Jack's world: the relationship puts nothing like authenticity at stake and creates no problem for anyone but Jack, who actually looks rather "harmless"—he's an "aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). The contrast between the dictator and Jack is ludicrous, which partly suggests why imitation is missing in the criticism: its operation in the adoption of role models goes without saying.

But the novel's parade of harmless imitating—Jack's Hitler pose, Grappa's Widmark, Jack and Babette's erotica and the other media aspirations—hides the complications of desire in its less stable forms. When a model moves within an individual's sphere of activity, the relationship is much closer than Jack and Hitler's, and often quite unstable. When a model sees his own desire for a scarce object confirmed by another's imitation of his desire, the model himself typically follows suit, thus confirming the choice of his admirer as well as his own—the escalation of interest then generating rivalry. The clear example of *internal* mediation in *White Noise* is Jack's developing friendship with Murray, "the man who would be Jack" (Duvall 139). Whereas Jack has found in Hitler an external mediator, Jack soon discovers himself to be an example for Murray: "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler," Murray offers, "you created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction" (11). Murray's intention, then, of starting an Elvis Studies program leaves Jack in a double bind:

> Murray sat across the room. His eyes showed a deep gratitude. I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal, allowing my subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure, a fellow who sat in La-Z-Boy chairs and shot out TVs. It was not a small matter. We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very thing that made me untouchable. (73–74)

It is, of course, not Elvis but Jack himself Murray wants to emulate, the tension here illustrating Jack's awareness that Murray has already "infiltrated his thoughts" (Duvall 142). Jack's adoption of an "aura" straight after Murray has described the barn using this term, intimates the incipient model role Murray is now playing for Jack—and others; Jack is only the first to appreciate Murray's talent in pop-

cultural interpretations; Murray's enthusiasms indeed are aimed at Babette, and Jack's concessions and displays of admiration only spur Murray on (the visiting professor's advances on Babette are well-known). The pair's rivalry then only escalates within the department when Dimitrios Cotsakis dies, "leaving only Jack as an object to Murray's desires" (Duvall 142)—which becomes starkly evident when Jack's final showdown and possible demise and elimination from both the college and Babette's bed hardly inhibit Murray's insistence that Jack either kill or be killed. Although the actual confrontation with Mr. Gray (and not Murray) comes when Jack has already disengaged from the violence Murray has drummed up and displaced on Mr. Gray, the parody of a blood feud in Murray's counseling of Jack reveals in DeLillo an understanding of mimetic rivalry's descent into violence.

Imitative desire therefore helps drive both the novel's major plot and simultaneously Jack's resistance to that plot. DeLillo has suggested the novel's first section to be an "aimless shuffle towards a high-intensity event" ("Don DeLillo" 286), but in ruminating on Murray's intentions, Jack is quite aware of the instability of internally mediated desire and therefore reluctant to advertise his own intentions or, as he later puts it, "to advance the action according to a plan" (98). "Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can," he tells himself early in the story, while "fearing some kind of deft acceleration" (18)—sensing accurately that, as the characters' desires each become plain to the others, events in the narrative do accelerate. Babette's desire for the mysterious drug Dylar, Murray's desire to be Jack, the latter's urge to redeem his self-image, and Mr. Gray's obsession with Babette—all feed into one another, each character necessarily responding artfully to the others,[8] much as the novelist in the middle of writing the narrative surely discovered.

Where, then, is the desire of the other characters in the novel? Largely in hiding. Just as Jack avoids acknowledging his own precarious desire, the other individuals mute theirs. What Jack asks about fear he might as well ask about desire: "is it something we all hide from each other, by mutual consent? Or do we share the secret without knowing it?" (198). Where internal mediation calls for its repression, desire typically reappears in the form of resentment, as a sense of insignificance at being unable to identify overtly with a model either absent or unapproachable—a condition affecting Blacksmith as a whole. Jack asserts, "we are for a small town remarkably free of resentment" (177), but his complaint betrays regret. Trying to account for the psychological fallout of the toxic event, he laments "there was no large city with a vaster torment we might use to see our own dilemma in some soothing perspective. No large city to blame for our sense of victimization. No city to hate and fear. No panting

megacenter to absorb our woe" (176). He admits "the absence of a polestar metropolis leaves us feeling in our private moments a little lonely" (177)—not unlike the insignificance he senses when he is spotted not wearing his Hitler garb, feeling harmless and indistinct.

The crowds at the airport after the crash landing and at the evacuation center during the airborne toxic event understandably both resent the media. When Jack's daughter learns the near-tragic flight had failed to attract a TV crew, she sympathizes: "They went through all that for nothing?" (92). Similarly, a spokesman for the Blacksmith evacuees complains:

> Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore? . . . Are they telling us it was insignificant, it was piddling? . . . Are they so bored by spills and contaminations and wastes? Do they think this is just television? "There's too much television already—why show more?" Don't they know it's real? . . . Shouldn't the streets be crawling with cameramen and soundmen and reporters? Shouldn't we be yelling out the window at them, "Leave us alone, we've been through enough already, get out of here with your vile instruments of intrusion." Do they have to have two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come flocking to a given site in their helicopters and network limos? . . . Haven't we earned the right to despise their idiot questions? (161–62)

This scene and others like it in *White Noise* foreground the resentment of a lack of mimetic attention: the ironic appeals to an imaginary news crew make plain the spokesman's feeling that this is an occasion significant enough to rival any mundane television report in the first place. Jack finds in his German teacher the same kind of antipathy: "when [his teacher] did speak, about the other boarders or the landlord, there was something querulous in his voice, a drawn-out note of complaint. It was important for him to believe that he'd spent his life among people who kept missing the point" (54). The import of mimesis and the structure of self-esteem here are the same as for the crowd.

The novel's comedy and epistemology grow out of the same tension. Alfonse Stompanato, Jack's department chair, even explains the rivalrous, self-sacrificial nature of the comic when he insists "the art of getting ahead in New York" is "based on learning how to express dissatisfaction in an interesting way. The air was full of rage and complaint. People had no tolerance for your particular hardship unless you knew how to entertain them with it." As if he were a stand-up comedian, "Alfonse was occasionally entertaining in a pul-

verizing way. He had a manner that enabled him to absorb and destroy all opinions in conflict with his. When he talked about popular culture, he exercised the closed logic of a religious zealot, one who kills for his beliefs" (65). As the novel's jester, though, Stompanato only makes light of mimetic principles already animating much of the other drama. Alfonse might seem a zealot, but Jack by the novel's end really is close to killing for his beliefs. Heinrich also aspires to Alfonse's manner of stomping other opinions. The debates between Heinrich and his father, for example, instead of juxtaposing discrete knowledge paradigms, show that Heinrich is adept in using knowledge in competition and that conclusions themselves are largely irrelevant; eventual triumph is all that really counts—not "a victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos" (24), as Jack protests, but a victory for Heinrich himself. This is clear on another occasion when Heinrich apparently wins a know-it-all exchange on the phone: nothing can trump his observation that "neutrinos go right through the earth" (34), even though, as Joseph Conte observes, "nothing of importance is communicated" (124). The relativity of knowledge is obvious for the Gladneys during the evacuation: "mainly we looked at people in other cars, trying to work out from their faces how frightened we should be" (120). And in a crisis, Jack reckons, "the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one's knowledge is less secure than your own" (120)—a theory accounting also for the déjà vu episodes, in which Steffie and Denise's pathological reactions to the toxic event appear only *after* the radio updates (112, 117, 121, 125–26, 133).

Jack's theory, accordingly, accounts for the dubious pedagogy in *White Noise*. Ensconced in "Advanced Nazism" (25), he is amazed at "how many people teach these days. . . . There is a teacher for every person. Everyone I know is either a teacher or a student" (55). But as Babette understands, the acceleration of mimetic rivalry in the postmodern knowledge industry makes this a natural condition of business. In a consumer culture where the denial of mimesis makes knowledge even more exclusive, more of a product than a discipline, student-teacher relations paradoxically break out everywhere. Babette explains, of the class she teaches:

> "It's going so well they want me to teach another course. . . . It's called Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters. Which I admit is a little more stupid than it absolutely has to be."
>
> "What could you teach?" Denise said.
>
> "That's just it. It's practically inexhaustible. Eat light foods in warm weather. Drink plenty of liquids."

> "But everybody knows that."
>
> "Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don't lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don't drink liquor on an empty stomach. The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. So people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or wrong way, at least for the time being." (171–72)

Children here are simply more accustomed to "trends rather than realities" (Billy 272). "This is the society of kids" (49), Murray notes. Adults are more confused because "minute by minute they're beginning to diverge from each other" (49–50). Murray's own students are "spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture." And his claim that "kids are a true universal" (50) identifies precisely DeLillo's "universal third person" (*Americana* 270). Wilder is the purest, most unaffected character in the novel only because he is the least exposed to mimetic invitation—to few models other than Jack and Babette.

Already reached by advertising, though, are Wilder's sisters, and Steffie's dream life actually demonstrates the receding of the desire myth itself. Conclusively a symptom of imitative desire is her famous sleeping murmur of two words "that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. Toyota Celica." Jack is amazed to recognize "the name of an automobile. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder" (155). But what one critic takes to be words "spoken through her, by her unconscious" (Frow 187) and what Jack also momentarily assumes to be "a language not quite of this world" is utterly of this world as Jack soon realizes (155), perhaps recalling the dreamy car advertisement Steffie evidently has in mind. Having bought Murray's theory "kids are a universal," Jack is wholly receptive to the brand choice of his daughter, who is probably the most sensitive to the family's old and grey, rusted station wagon. In suggesting the Gladneys buy Toyota, Steffie exposes the unconscious for what Marshall McLuhan understood it to be: "a direct creation of print [and media] technology, the ever-mounting slagheap of repeated awareness" (139). While critics, then, have complained that DeLillo fails to provide his characters depth and integrity, fails to provide an "instrinsic self for his characters" (Billy 273), the novelist in fact has shown carefully how the intrinsic self is a myth.

Significance

Mimetic theory reveals the priority of social imitating in media culture. It also resolves the problem of the simulacrum, what Nicoletta Pireddu calls "the epistemological crisis that affects contemporary reality" (qtd. in Moraru 198)—the crisis that affects the world of *White Noise*.[9] As Christian Moraru observes of the simulacrum, "it is the copy which legitimates, if not engenders, reality" (198). He identifies here the mechanism in Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" and suggests why "the real" is a concept with less and less purchase the more it is employed: the legitimation of reality by the copy constitutes the same mimetic structure as that between Jack and Murray (where Jack's self-image is a function of Murray's attention)—therefore making "the real" entirely relative. In identifying and describing "what matters," generally speaking, the *significance* of mimetic precedence becomes more instrumental as a concept. It is the pragmatic nature of significance more than structural linguistics that explains both signification in general as well as the order of the novel's events. As Vilem Flüsser notes, "reality isn't that which is signified; it is that which is significant" (26). Gans elaborates: "The structuralist notion of signification as difference expresses the systematic forgetting of the raison d'etre of this difference, which is not the plurality of meanings, but significance: the difference between what is significant and what is not. Use of a sign is not in the first place a paradigmatic choice among signs, but a choice to signify—a choice to create significance out of non-significance" (*Originary Thinking* 105).This reveals why, for the artist, reality is "not a matter of fact, it is an achievement" (Gass 282). But DeLillo's achievement is remarkable because his narrative in *White Noise* dramatizes the very principle—that mimesis generates the significance structuring narrative in the first place.

The "radiance in dailiness" (DeLillo, "Outsider" 63), DeLillo shows, from the level of the novel's aphoristic sentences up to entire "aimless days" (*White Noise* 18), emanates not from a given reality but a constantly shifting attention to otherwise insignificant things. That he foregrounds in his "realism" the emergence of minutiae from mundane events ("blue jeans in the dryer" [18]) in the same measure that he questions the ontology of large public events ("the sky takes on content" [324]), illustrates his exploration of how significance is generated. By dramatizing the investigation, the author shows how meaning stems from events that are significant because they are first public and thus mutually apparent; events that are sacred because they are violent. When Alfonse grills the faculty about their whereabouts the day James Dean died, he invokes the same power of the sacred that Kennedy's assassination had for his generation

and that the World Trade Center attacks have had on the present. The novel's most urgent question demonstrates that "white noise" can be more or less significant in relation to the flux of violent events: "How serious can it be if it happens all the time?" Babette asks. "Isn't the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it's not an everyday occurrence?" (174). Although her question strictly concerns pollution, it applies to the many crises experienced by the Gladneys as meaningful in proportion to the scale of their calamity. And while the mimetic nature of the conflict might be hidden, its derivatives indeed structure a novel of "spectacular narratives" (Moraru 198).

Everywhere in *White Noise* are crises that are significant because they are first of all public, collectively experienced, and therefore binding. Numerous scenes dramatize DeLillo's observation that "we depend on disaster to consolidate our vision" ("Power of History" 63) and reflect Girard's theory that calamitous events create sacred bonds precisely because they interrupt mundane, private crises and bring relief for the community as a whole. One time, for example, on the night of the insane asylum fire, Jack and his son go to watch: "There were other men at the scene with their adolescent boys. Evidently fathers and sons seek fellowship at such events. Fires help draw them closer, provide a conversational wedge. There is equipment to appraise, the technique of firemen to discuss and criticize. The manliness of firefighting—the virility of fires, one might say—suits the kind of laconic dialogue that fathers and sons can undertake without awkwardness of embarrassment" (239). The primitive mindedness here is the point. When Jack starts to reflect, pondering why the fire fascinates, Heinrich interrupts: "this is my first burning building, give me a chance" (240).

Heinrich's assumption that many fires are to come echoes Babette's question—"how serious can it be if it happens all the time?"—as well as Girard's arguments that the monotonous regularity of such violence over time diminishes its power to create meaning. Alfonse makes the same point when Jack asks why "decent, well-meaning people and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television" (65). "It's normal," Alfonse replies, "because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information. The flow is constant. . . . Only a catastrophe gets our attention" (66). But the repetition of catastrophe means catastrophes themselves soon pale. The glamour in the Gladneys' TV ritual becomes "wholesome domestic sport," bringing the family together (16), but the spectacle's power inevitably wanes, only aggravating the problem:

> There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (64)

The addiction appears again during the evacuation when Heinrich is "steeped happily in disaster." Did he, Jack wonders, "seek distraction from his own small miseries in some violent and overwhelming event? His voice betrayed a craving for terrible things" (123). In both cases, the routine diminishes the effects and results in greater demands.

So the Gladneys get what they ask for—"something bigger, grander, more sweeping," the "black, billowing cloud" (133) that bears many of the characteristics of the sacred. Such are the scale and the immediacy of the toxic event, Jack cannot help but guess why it seems supernatural:

> The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low. . . . But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event. . . . Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event. (127–28)

Although the event is described as a toxic chemical spill, it is hard not to conclude with Lawrence Buell that "a very different sort of 'event' might have served equally well" (51): this moment focuses on the role humans play in their own experience of disaster. Just as

Girard argues that the deities "responsible" for natural disasters are first the apparently-supernatural effects of self-generated human crises (destructive on a comparable scale to natural disasters), Jack notes that the "primitive" impact of the airborne event appears to conceal its origin as a man-made event. Still, although Jack knows earlier that "man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood have been complicated by technology" (22), it takes a catastrophe in his own back yard to bring this fact to his attention, to get him out of the house and make him realize that such disaster usually entails suffering.

The trauma of *White Noise* for the Gladneys is not the toxic event itself, but the fact that they find themselves among its victims and discover calamity even depends on victims. When disasters are elsewhere, Jack tells Heinrich, "these things are not important. The important thing is location. It's there, we're here" (115). But when the sirens squawk from their "own red brick firehouse," the Gladneys have to leave their home and admit their assumption that "these things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas." Jack's statement echoes Girard's point that the marginalized of society are typically its scapegoats: "society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters" (114). But DeLillo foregrounds the role of the scapegoat also in other, more mundane crises. Stompanato explains the condition of appreciating disaster: "We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera. We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves what it gets. Californians invented the concept of lifestyle. This alone warrants their doom" (65). Seriously, DeLillo recognizes the centrality of the victim. At the asylum fire, Jack is not simply awed by the calamity; he does see the mad, escaping victim, "lost to dreams and furies" (239), and he recognizes the bystanders' link to the destruction. Although only indirectly human, the synthetic burning smell Jack detects intrudes on his appreciation of the fire as an "ancient, spacious and terrible drama." Whereas the fire had brought people together, Jack senses the artificial smell "made people feel betrayed; the crowd broke up" (240).

Jack's understanding of human complicity in death, then, not surprisingly, appears in one of his Advanced Nazism lectures. Speaking about the Nazis, he notes, "crowds came to form a shield against their own dying . . . to become a crowd is to keep out death." He realizes here the role mimesis plays in unifying the crowd around a solitary victim: becoming a crowd keeps out death precisely because

it polarizes factious rivalries into a conflict of all against one. Jack's intuition of this is the real source of his fear that "to break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone"—that same fear that drives him through the novel at the same time it inhibits the narrative. Still, although he whispers to his students "the terrible word" from "the Old Norse, Death" (73), he fails to identify in his personal fear the Old Norse for "awe," a condition that diluted over time accounts properly for the anxiety pervading the novel: the fear that "becomes more primitive" as technology "advances in complexity and scope" (the novel's main equation [see DeLillo, "Don DeLillo" 286]) is arguably the same awe resulting from disasters that, however mediated, are in the final analysis typically man-made.[10] Jack's anxiety about plots reveals the edge of this understanding: underlying his rant that "all plots tend to move deathward" is the realization that mimesis and rivalry, if unchecked, snowball toward crisis and sacrificial closure.

The extraordinary achievement of *White Noise*, then, is that Jack eventually discovers for himself what he only fearfully theorizes about in his lecture. He recognizes the role of mimesis in plotting and that sacrificial conclusions are a staple of narrative. But he is also aware of contagion in his personal contracts with Murray and Mr. Gray, and can barely refrain from engaging with Gray after learning about him. After Babette's confession, Gray in fact becomes Jack's rivalrous double (appearing in Jack's own private, flashing impressions of his wife), and in the dark, Jack's mind "runs on like a devouring machine" (224). Given the narrator's own escalating crisis, time naturally accelerates in the novel's third and final section.

So although Jack is propelled by motives he prefers not to think about, DeLillo allows him enough time and space to reflect on and to avoid the crisis we anticipate. The narrator is put in mind, by Murray, of the escalation that has brought him thus far and of the relative merits of the violence proposed. Instead of confirming Murray's case, however, DeLillo satirizes it; Murray mocks the logic of violence when he likens it to a video game: "Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions" (290). The ambiguity of Murray's peremptory theory that "violence is a form of rebirth" (290) then, allows Jack both to see his family being revived by TV disasters, but also to refuse in the end to follow through in murdering Mr. Gray—sensing as he does that Murray's equation ultimately means nothing more than "death answering death" (32), as the author describes mimetic conflict in his article "Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson, and the Millennium".[11]

The novel's revelation therefore is indeed that "death no longer provides any meaningful telos for plots" (Yukman 115). The increased exposure of the sacred-as-violence through the course of the narrative has undermined for Jack in particular the very power of that sacred. Knowing a sacrificial conclusion would only perpetuate the oldest myth, DeLillo (as Jack) in the end appears to want to avoid imminent murder. Jack at least wants to "see myself from Mink's viewpoint" and then does find himself "above resentment," his "humanity soaring" (311, 314, 315). The remarkable open-endedness of the final pages, the lack of narrative closure, is therefore a consequence not of simulacral indeterminacy, nor of any "atmospheric weirdness" steeping the final pages (326). It is a function of Jack's aborting the murder. As the nun tells him at the hospital, "there is no truth without fools" (319): in refusing to kill Mink, Jack refuses to be taken for one, and so denies the plot any traditionally significant closure. Proof that the narrative's major strand remains at a loose end is clear in Jack's mental note that although Mink would not "be all right" for a while, "he wouldn't die either, which gave him the edge on me" (320).

Taking Jack's place, then, is the nun who plays the fool for all and who allegorically exposes the new "truth" of the postmodern age, its foundation upon the expulsion of religion itself. The casting out of the earliest human science (religion) by the advanced knowledge of the latest science of technoconsumerism paradoxically reinstates the sacred, which DeLillo depicts reappearing in the supermarket—the "truth" of the market being its reputed sanctity, the inviolability of the economic. But in closing the novel at the supermarket, DeLillo questions the market's supercession of the traditional sacred as a means for containing resentment. On each occasion of commercial transaction in the narrative, the author suggests the possibility of the market restoring an order, of "recharging us spiritually" (37). Jack feels "blessed" at the ATM (46) and glories in his shopping spree that allows him to be the potlatch chieftain, "the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, baksheesh" (84). The supermarket is presented as a contemporary temple removed at least from obvious economic violence and injustice. But the sacred here is deliberately ambiguous; DeLillo seems uncertain as to whether the market can contain the resentment it generates (much as the traditional sacred attempted). Elsewhere, in an interview, he sees "contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America," viewing "this

desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go" ("An Outsider" 57–58). Given America's greater liberation of mimetic desire—"we still lead the world in stimuli" Murray notes (*White Noise* 189)—this may for now be an essentially American question, but as Heller notes, the novel at the same time "goes beyond the American context and points out a global dilemma that may have reached the United States just a little earlier than the rest of the world" (46). *White Noise*, Thomas Peyser has emphasized, does attempt to comprehend a condition, however welcome or resented, now spreading to most of the world.

The enduring mystery about the novel and DeLillo's oeuvre in general, though, in light of the author's exposure of anthropological myth in *White Noise*, may be DeLillo's insistence on retaining mystery and his reluctance to elaborate on his work's own revelations. Though he declares of *White Noise*, "I never set out to write an apocalyptic novel" ("I Never Set Out" 31), he also claims that talking about his work would mean the "sources weren't deep enough" (LeClair 80), suggesting an interest in conserving a mythology about (his) creation—something that *White Noise*, on the contrary, exposes. Still, the author admits this reserve might be too personal. Considering in *Ratner's Star* the development of the artist's "own principle of intelligence or individual consciousness," the novelist is aware that "the work gradually reveals its attachment to the charged particles of other minds, perhaps even to reality itself" (qtd. in Molesworth 148)—an attachment unmistakable in *White Noise* in the mimesis that both generates and contains its culture. Since Thomas Schaub's charge that DeLillo "commodifies mystery" (131), the novelist surely has revealed more of not only his America but his anthropology of mimesis and creativity as well.[12] Further study might trace in the author's work, from the early writing on advertising to the economic sacred of *Cosmopolis*, the development of his reading of imitation both in American culture and in his own art.

Notes

1. Long a staple of university curricula in America and overseas, *White Noise* has probably generated more critical attention still than any of DeLillo's other novels (unless one notes, with David Cowart, the journalistic and now critical reception of *Underworld*) and surely did, as Cornel Bonca suggests, replace *The Crying of Lot 49* "as the one book professors use to introduce students to a postmodern sensibility" (25).

2. In his influential essay on *White Noise* and Jean Baudrillard, Leonard Wilcox describes DeLillo's world as "one of free-floating and endless simulacra, a meaning cut off from all bases" (205); the barn is, he writes, an instance of "the postmodern experience of proliferating images without ground" (200). Cowart's formulation of the postmodern assumption is similar: "The only reality knowable is the one shaped by endlessly self-referential sign systems, and by an art committed to replication, pastiche, and the commodified 'mechanical reproduction' that Benjamin describes in his most famous essay. In short, the age of the simulacrum" (3–4). Laura Barrett, most recently, confirms the consensus that "the simulacrum, 'a copy without an original,' is the most salient metaphor of *White Noise*" (97). See also Hayles 394.

3. Noel King adopts this line from DeLillo's description of the news reports in *White Noise* (129) and would suggest critics congregate like the crowd in the novel does in the wake of the airborne toxic event (King 81). The immediate outcome for commentary in this case, though, is similar to the predicament for DeLillo's Americans as Paul Cantor sees them, who are "set adrift in a sea of possibilities which, being equally available, become equally valuable, or what is the same thing, equally valueless" (41).

4. As Daniel Born insists, "the realm of the sacred in DeLillo's work—and in post-modern work more generally—needs preliminary attention rather than receiving treatment as an afterthought or appendage to the linguistic whole" (219). The title of Born's essay, "Sacred Noise," suggests that the scientific metaphor of "white noise" has itself become a sacred element at the core of the criticism.

5. Girard outlines mimetic desire first in his study of the French novel, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, then expands on his anthropology primarily in *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

6. Mark Osteen, for example, has pointed to the "universal third person" in the novel, writing that through this mediator "shopping produces a simulated self" (175); Jeremy Green has referred to "the advertising dream of 'entering the third person'" (580); Frank Lentricchia has categorized the desire specifically as an American phenomenon ("Tales" 88); Paul Cantor has reviewed Jack's *imitatio Adolphi* (54), mentioning too the Nazis' own imitation of the Romans' imperial style (55); and Frow has suggested "the world is so saturated with representations that it becomes increasingly difficult to separate primary actions from imitations of actions" (183). See also Heller 42.

7. Gans develops Girard's anthropology and examines in *The Origin of Language* and other works the origin of specifically human culture. See also Thomas Bertonneau's article, which discusses the "double necessity" of Gans and Girard's work.

8. Babette's evasions, for example, DeLillo needs only hint at: Jack thinks Babette is too honest and lacking "the guile for conspiracies" (5), but as Duvall notes, Murray, who likes "complicated women" (*White Noise* 11), senses the guile she indeed possesses and uses in her own, adulterous plot (Duvall 141–43).

9. Baudrillard explores in *Simulations* the paradox of the simulacrum: "the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (1).

10. It is the speed of new technologies more than anything else that allows an advantage, an upper hand, in rivalry: the accelerations, complexity, and range of technology today thus amplify those crises originally mimetic in nature. Arguably, the paranoia so characteristic of much of DeLillo's other fiction, as the author himself suggests, is also a product of the same religious awe seen so often in *White Noise*—"something old, a leftover from some forgotten part of the soul" (DeLillo, "Don DeLillo" 303).

11. To see in this penultimate dialogue between Murray and Jack an actual advocating of violence, as Bawer does, is to misread DeLillo as completely as Redding misreads Girard when he assumes the latter actually advocates sacrifice as a means for resolving conflict. When Girard writes that the violence of sacrificial ritual restores order to the community, he is not advocating violence any more than DeLillo condones catastrophe when he laments that "we depend on disaster to consolidate our vision" (DeLillo, "Power of History" 63). Contrary to Redding's interpretation, Girard is an advocate of nonviolence.

12. The intimate notes in DeLillo's brief commentary on the writing of *Underworld* in "The Power of History" reveal a few of the author's thoughts on artistic creativity.

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